

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center

DEMONSTRATIONS AND PROTESTS FACT SHEET

Responding to Student Demonstrations and Protests in Schools and School Districts

Background

Classrooms are often the first settings in which students learn what it means to be civically engaged; and when students choose to use demonstrations and protests as a tool for civic engagement, school buildings, grounds, and communities are often selected as the setting. The response of students across the country to the February 14, 2018, active shooter situation at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, has drawn attention to one type of student demonstration and protest in particular—school walkouts—and the need for education agencies to prepare and respond.

On March 14 and April 20, 2018 (and on [various other dates during the spring semester](#)), students across the country plan to leave their classrooms and school buildings to protest gun violence in honor of the students and staff members who lost their lives last month, and to commemorate the anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting.¹

Our research has shown that the response from education agencies to these planned walkouts has been varied. Some school districts are using these events as opportunities to teach and host discussions with students and the whole school community about violence and other key topics in school safety and emergency prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery.² Others may be exploring how to handle lost instructional time and disciplinary issues

Share how your education agency plans to respond to upcoming and future school walkouts via our Community of Practice:
<https://rems.ed.gov/COP/REMSCOPforum/topics.aspx?ForumID=137>.

For more information, and lessons learned from real-life events, see the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Office of Safe and Healthy Students (OSHS) and REMS TA Center Publication, [Responding to School Walkout Demonstrations](#). It examines the incidence of student walkout demonstrations and the various ways in which administrators, school staff, law enforcement, and the community at large can help keep youth safe, while still supporting their desire for self-expression.

¹ The 17-minute walkout scheduled for March 14 is [hosted by Women's March Youth Empower](#). However, other national school walkout events have been planned for March 24 ([hosted by March For Our Lives](#)) and April 20 ([hosted by the Indivisible Project team](#)) to memorialize the anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting.

² View statements and comments issued by [Laramie County School District #1 in Wyoming](#), [Fulton County Public Schools in Georgia](#) and [Grand Rapids Public Schools in Michigan](#).

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that may result from the demonstrations. Many education agencies are likely working with community partners to balance the need to ensure continuity of learning and operations, as well as whole school community safety and security, while still encouraging the interest among youth on civic engagement and school safety.

Students may feel the need to participate in a demonstration or protest for a number of reasons, such as perceptions that their views are not being taken seriously or seriously enough; being called to action after exposure to information, messages and images from corollary media coverage following emergency events³; or based on their own personal responses to and opinions regarding social and political trends or events. In some scenarios, students may feel compelled to plan and lead their own protest or demonstration in the school environment. In these situations, schools may want to consider the following:

- Whether it would be appropriate for the school to set up a safe space for students to protest, or to work with local officials to find a safe space in the community for student protests;
- Whether school or local police should accompany students in protest;
- How to protect school and community property in collaboration with community partners;
- How to handle lost instructional time;
- Whether and under what circumstances disciplinary action may be required;
- How to ensure that the learning environment of students who are not participating in demonstrations is not disrupted;
- How to ensure students who wish to participate in demonstrations have a safe place to express their concerns and be civically engaged; and
- How to engage with families to help reinforce expectations of students, and discuss possible responses to protests.

While demonstrations and protests (and the themes and events that prompted them) can cause high levels of emotion, including fear and anxiety, there are many steps education agencies can take to help



Students from Sacred Heart Academy high school and local community members hold a demonstration about levee repairs at Jackson Square in New Orleans, Louisiana. **Source:** Federal Emergency Management Institute Image Library

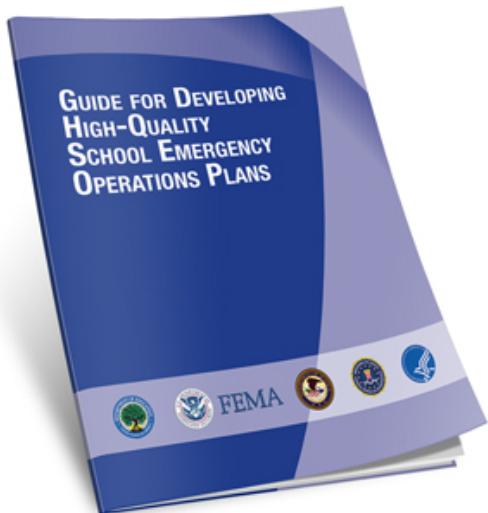
³ For information on disaster media coverage, its effects on students, and detailed ways to help students cope with disaster media coverage, see [Disaster Media Intervention: Helping Students Cope with Disaster Media Coverage: A Guide for Teachers and School Staff](https://www.ed.gov/documents/disaster-media-intervention-helping-students-cope-disaster-media-coverage-guide-teachers-and-school-staff), Disaster and Community Crisis Center, University of Missouri.

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students, staff, and the whole school community process the event; express their feelings; and strengthen coping skills and resilience under the guidance and care of the adults, educators, administrators, and partners who support them every day. Ultimately, finding constructive ways to debrief and discuss these types of events and the issues surrounding them supports a positive school climate in which students and staff feel safe to express their feelings and perspectives, and creates learning opportunities around real-world events.

Incorporating Plans to Respond to Student Demonstrations in School Emergency Operations Plans (EOPs)



Demonstrations and protests like school walkouts impact the entire school community, including students, teachers, staff, and families. From safety and mental and behavioral health to continuity of learning and operations, schools (public and nonpublic) and school districts may have to address and support students and staff in a variety of areas when responding to planned demonstrations and protests. For school administrators and emergency planning teams, this can seem daunting. However, pre-planning—especially with community partners—using the six-step planning process outlined in the [Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans \(School Guide\)](#) can help ensure the whole community stays safe.

Using the Six-Step Planning Process to Plan

Schools and school districts are also encouraged to examine their EOPs when real-world emergency events happen to ensure they are prepared for resulting demonstrations and protests that may occur on their school campus or within their community. Federal partners in school emergency preparedness, including the U.S. Departments of Education, Homeland Security, Justice, Health and Human Services, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation, recommend that schools and school districts use existing safety, security, and emergency management efforts in conjunction with the six-step planning process described in the [School Guide](#) to review, revise, and create EOPs. The following section provides examples of how the six-step planning process can be used to incorporate planning for student walkout demonstrations into an EOP.

Step 1: Form a Collaborative Planning Team: In this first step, the planning team is formed, comprised of a core planning team, school personnel and community partners, including law enforcement, and a district representative. In planning for these types of events, it is critically important for schools to



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work with partners, both district and school-based, as well as those on the community level. Other relevant planning partners may include educators, counselors, administrators, facilities management staff, as well as local municipality government officials (e.g., mayor's office, permit office), the local traffic division, and the District Attorney's office.

Step 2: Understand the Situation: Here, the planning team uses a variety of assessments to identify possible threats and hazards to the school, such as violence or property damage resulting from student protests, and to assess the risk and vulnerabilities posed by them. One tool that may be especially useful in this context is a Culture and Climate Assessment that measures students' connectedness to the school and teachers and staff. ED provides several [School Climate Surveys](#) that measure three domains of engagement, safety, and the environment. Surveys are available for middle and high school students, instructional staff, non-instructional staff, and parents/guardians. (More information on the topic of school climate is available in the archived OSHS and REMS TA Center Webinar [How Positive School Climate Can Enhance School Safety.](#))

A Site Assessment, such as one conducted using the OSHS and REMS TA Center [SITE ASSESS](#) tool, may also help determine the level of safety and security within a school's building and/or grounds. For example, it might help in the process of identifying certain areas that would be better than others for protests to occur, so the school can help direct students to safer locales. (More information on Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design [CPTED], which emphasizes how to use environmental design to help improve safety and security, is discussed in more detail in the Key Considerations section below.)

Step 3: Determine Goals and Objectives and **Step 4: Plan Development (Identifying Courses of Action):** The work conducted in Step 2 will reveal that several threats, such as demonstrations and protests, and cross cutting activities/functions, such as security⁴ and communication⁵, will need to be addressed by the EOP. Goals, which are broad statements, can then be created by the planning team for desired outcomes before, during, and after each threat and function. Objectives can be established

⁴ See the Bureau of Justice Administration's resource [Managing Large Scale Security Events: A Planning Primer for Law Enforcement](#) for more information on the role of law enforcement in planning for events of this type.

⁵ More information is available in the [Social Media and Tactical Considerations For Law Enforcement](#) report (see page 41) by U.S. Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Service and Police Executive Research Forum.

SIX-STEP PLANNING PROCESS

- **Step 1:** Form a collaborative planning team.
- **Step 2:** Understand the situation.
- **Step 3:** Determine goals and objectives.
- **Step 4:** Plan development (identify courses of action).
- **Step 5:** Plan preparation, review, and approval.
- **Step 6:** Plan implementation and maintenance.



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that are specific and measurable actions to achieve each of these goals, and courses of action are then developed to accomplish the objectives. When thinking through the courses of action (or, the who, what, when, where, why, and how of accomplishing the objectives) for planning, it is important to consider the key planning principle of considering all settings and all times. For this type of event, this may include whether student demonstrations and protests will be

- On, nearby, and/or off campus;
- Sanctioned and unsanctioned; and/or
- Before, during, and after the school day.

Also, consider the role of virtual communication and cyber capabilities; whether for spreading the word or extending protests, the virtual/cyber setting and these tools must be considered. It is also important to think through the possible themes and prompts for these kind of events, such as court cases, media events, and board decisions.

Step 5: Plan Preparation, Review, and Approval: In this step, a draft of the EOP is written, including threat- and hazard-specific and functional annexes. Goals, objectives and courses of action related to student demonstrations and protests would likely be included in a threat-specific annex, but the planning team can decide where that information fits best within the EOP based on the needs of the school community and partners who play a role in implementing the plan. The draft is then reviewed by senior leadership and approved.

Step 6: Plan Implementation and Maintenance: Finally, the plan is implemented, which includes providing training to teachers, staff, and administrators on their roles and responsibilities during a demonstration or protest, and conducting emergency exercises to test the school's response. Whenever possible, find opportunities for student leaders and stewards to play an active role in planned trainings and exercises.

Key Considerations in the Planning Process

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)

CPTED is a multi-disciplinary strategic approach to deterring criminal behavior and protecting the school community. It can be applied to all protective measures, as described below.

- **Natural Surveillance.** This strategy allows for unobtrusive observation of a particular setting through design features that maximize visibility of people, parking areas, and building entrances such as doors and windows that look out on to streets and parking areas. School staff can work with facilities and grounds management staff to develop as clear a view as possible of its most critical areas, including all possible entry and exit points of the building and its



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surroundings, and the areas where a demonstration or protest might take place. Another example is having staff or partners positioned in key areas, collectively surveying the entire campus.

- **Territorial Reinforcement.** This strategy restricts who may enter or exit the grounds, a facility, a corridor, or room by defining property lines and distinguishing private spaces from public spaces. Strategies can include landscape plantings, pavement designs, fences, lines, and signs. In consideration of demonstrations, different types of entrance procedures (e.g., stop, & sign in), parking designations (e.g., lower lot, off campus), and partitions.
- **Natural Access Control.** The third strategy demonstrates ownership and respect for property by designing streets, sidewalks, building entrances, and neighborhood gateways to clearly indicate public routes and by discouraging access to private areas via structural elements such as designated visitor parking with signs pointing visitors to the front office to sign in, and signs designating restricted areas of the building and grounds. Actively controlling access to and monitoring a school's grounds and entrances help guard against unauthorized and unwanted entry to the facility and works to support many safety, security, and emergency management efforts. The focus of controlling access is to ensure that only members and authorized persons may be on the grounds and in the building. Creating a complementary system to continually monitor the facility and its surroundings strengthens this protective effort.
- **Target Hardening.** This final strategy prohibits entry or access through features such as window locks, dead bolts for doors, and interior door hinges. And, for the campus, gates, patrols, and partitions.

Emergency management planning teams at education agencies should work in close collaboration with their facilities management teams to implement CPTED approaches before, during, and after demonstrations and protests to enhance safety.⁶

Addressing Issues of Controversy to Promote a Positive School Climate

Schools and school districts can also create broader educational opportunities to examine the issues brought up by the events that prompt student demonstrations and protests. For example, schools and school districts may consider ways to integrate current events into the curriculum:

- History, government, social studies or civics classes could:
 - Examine the historical context of issues brought up;

⁶ For more information on CPTED and Site Assessment Resources, see the OSHS and REMS TA Center Webinar [Designing Safe Schools: Planning and Retrofitting for Safety in Education Facilities](#).

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- Lead a lesson on non-violent protests; or,
- Discuss First Amendment rights to free speech.
- Homeroom classes could facilitate open discussions on relevant topics so students can constructively discuss differing viewpoints.
- English or creative writing classes could encourage journaling or free writing on relevant topics.
- Classes focused on use of information technology can emphasize responsible civic engagement in online settings (both in and out of the classroom).

Schools and school districts can also integrate comprehensive violence prevention programming, to include trauma-informed care, prosocial instructions, conflict resolution, and restorative justice. In each educational setting, it is important for teachers to establish ground rules for discussing sensitive topics; showing respect; and maintaining a safe space for students to express their thoughts, feelings, or perspectives.

Key Resources

In addition to the materials identified above, other materials of note include:

- School EOPs In-Depth: Planning for Large Events (OSHS & REMS TA Center). Trainings on this topic are available as a [specialized training package](#), which includes a PowerPoint presentation with speaker notes, resource guide, and tabletop exercise, and in an [online format](#). The trainings cover activities such as how to understand a school's vulnerability from large events and how to plan for them.
- [Building Trauma-Informed Communities for Youth Webinar](#) (OSHS and National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments). In this archived event, presenters discuss how demonstrations and protests can traumatize students and how to take a trauma-informed approach in youth-serving systems.
- [Civil Unrest Tabletop Exercise](#) (Texas School Safety Center). This PowerPoint presentation, available in the REMS TA Center [Tool Box](#), introduces emergency exercises and provides scenarios and questions for a civil unrest event. The Tool Box is an interactive and virtual library of tools developed by emergency manager practitioners in the field and containing relevant resources pertinent to the needs of local education agencies, schools, and their community partners as they engage in the process of emergency preparedness planning.

To learn how other education agencies have planned for and responded to school walkouts and other demonstrations and protests, view the following resources.

- [Demonstration/Student Unrest](#) (State of Iowa) p.29. The 2012 Iowa School Safety Guide, developed as a template to assist schools in Iowa enhance their safety programs and created by nine state and local agencies, including Iowa Department of Education, Iowa Homeland Security

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and Emergency Management, and Iowa Department of Public Safety offers the Emergency Response Flip Chart content for Demonstration/Student Unrest.

- [Navigating Student Walkouts & Mass Protests](#) (National School Boards Association). This outline provides recommendations for schools in a checklist format, and also details possible school walkout scenarios.
- [OSBA Student Protest Guidance](#) (Oregon School Boards Association). This Web page provides answers to commonly asked questions from educators and administrators about how to respond to school walkouts.
- [Procedures for Handling Disturbances, or Demonstrations on or Adjacent to School Sites](#), (Los Angeles Unified School District). This sample policy bulletin offers lessons learned and an example of a school district policy addressing relevant issues.

Submit tools you use to prepare for and respond to student demonstrations and walkouts to our Tool Box.

<https://rems.ed.gov/ResourceSubmission/ResourceSubmissions.aspx>

Checklists, drills, forms, charts, guidelines, reports, sample policies, procedures, and much more!

Upload #ToolsYouUse to our Tool Box!



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